

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB- 37 How Brazilian is Brazil?

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July 31, 1965Mr. Richard Nolte  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

From the beginning of my stay in Brazil, Brazilians strove to impress upon me how different they were from other Latin American countries. "We do not use violence to settle our problems," or "You must realize that we are the most independent people in the world," "The Argentinos are too sad all the time; we are a happy people," "The Chileans have a sterile culture, not a rich and varied one like ours."

In fact the people in each country I visited in my swing around South America took great pride in their distinctiveness and were offended by our North American habit of lumping Argentinians or Chileans with Brazilians or, worse yet, with Peruvians and Bolivians. They each tried to convince me of their inherent differences.

Are Latin Americans really so unique from each other? Or do they have similarities enough to make it possible to generalize about them as a whole? This question grew on me as I spent more time with Brazilian problems. It finally caused me to look closely at Chile and Argentina, the two countries which, with tiny Uruguay, are the most developed and the most Europeanized below the equator and therefore have the most possibility of similarity with Brazil. My stay in each country was necessarily short and my contacts mostly limited to sociologists and educators, but some impressions have emerged from my trip.

Argentina

Argentina has some of the richest land in Latin America. Second only to Brazil in size, it is endowed with most of the basic resources needed for a developing nation. There is plenty of land and food. There are developing primary and secondary industries. There is less poverty, more literacy and the largest middle class of any Latin American country except perhaps Mexico. But Argentina stumbles and staggers from one economic and political crisis to another, the greatness of the country hamstrung by problems that appear too demanding and too difficult for any ready solution.

Their economy has been based too exclusively on the export of grain and beef. The too rapid immigration which brought stimulation to the economy also caused problems of adjustment between old and new settlers. Regional struggles for national political power and migration to Buenos Aires caused urban problems and the neglect of other regions. This further aggravated the inability of the people to make political changes easily.

What impressed me was that there was so much national pride and so little cooperation; so much talk and so little constructive action; so much concern about the nation and so little about all the people who must come together to make it one; so much self-pity and so little self-reliance. I found four characteristics which seemed to me to play a large part in compounding the complexity of their problems. You might call them the four "isms": personalism, paternalism, fatalism and narcissism.

"To be from the Argentine nation, to be of this people, this is a reason for elemental, irrefutable and axiomatic pride for any true Argentine" writes Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. It may be traditional but it is not yet strong enough for Argentinians to extend their trust to all those who are their countrymen. Their characteristic pride in their nationality and their family is a self-centered pride and does not carry over to a faith in others, those outside their group or family. Instead of trust there is more likely to be suspicion. A newsman-historian explains, "Why shouldn't they be suspicious? It has been a pattern in our country for justice to come only to those close to the fount of authority, a kin or a friend. If you are not in the in-group you can't be sure how you will be treated."

Where such personalism prevails everyone must look after himself, his family, his group, in that order. It is expected that everyone else does the same. Therefore it is presumed that if a person is not related to you in some way he will be looking after his own interests rather than yours and cannot be trusted. A person is expected to be dishonest until proven otherwise. This makes it a bit difficult, to say the least, for people of different backgrounds and different interests to work together effectively in government or on a national program.

In place of unity and cooperation in the country, the military provides what stability there is to the Government. While most Argentinians declare their country is not military-minded, the military has been looked to repeatedly when the country is divided and it has been traditionally the most secure of any Argentinian profession.

An extension of this personalism, and yet often running counter to it, is the paternalism which so often moves the Argentinian to evade any responsibility for his faults. This dependency grew up initially from the structure of the family and, in the early days, the dynasties of the landed aristocracy, each of whom took care of his own.

The somewhat feudal days of the pampas are gone and in today's more industrialized society the father figure has become the Government. Peron was a good patron, especially to the working class. Under him, for example, the railways were nationalized and an increasing number of workers found jobs with it. His padding of employment has helped to keep the railway inefficient and in the red. The money expended to meet the oversize payroll (over  $\frac{1}{2}$  million employees) this year will make up 40% of the country's financial deficit. In 1962 President Arturo Frondizi tried to eliminate some of the excess working force but managed only to trigger a strike which not only prevented him from

carrying out his plan but gained a 30% wage increase for the workers. Today no government is strong enough to cut back the dependency.

In the meantime the people pass the buck. There is a general shirking of responsibility. "They" are always responsible, as though the criticizer were from somewhere else. "They" may refer to the government, business, Peronists, Radicals, the military or the United States. A businessman told me, "Various groups keep demanding more of this and that, conscious only of their own needs, thinking that the reason they don't have more is someone else's fault and that it is up to someone to make the correction, to solve the problem. Seldom do they give any thought to the fact that to get more they must do more, work more hours, do better work, improve their skills, etc."

Since the Government has provided it is expected to continue; since the land has provided it is expected to continue. Since the country has been well endowed it is expected to flourish. It appears that Argentinians believe that in time, somehow, perhaps through some kind of divine grace, their problems and those of their country will be solved.

Argentina may no longer be first in importance in Latin America, <sup>but</sup> this has not deterred the Argentinian's faith in the greatness and the destiny of the Argentine people. They talk of greatness as if it were an innate quality which events might halt for a time but not long delay. "With what we are and what we have how can we expect anything else. God is with us." Again Ortega y Gasset writes, "The Argentine people are not content to be one nation among many; they require an exalted destiny; they demand for themselves a proud future; they have no taste for a history without triumph and are determined to command."

They can rationalize their lessening importance in Latin America with the proud assertion that they are really more European than Latin American. They point out that they are the only European country in the Americas, except perhaps for Canada, who are over 90% racially pure. Other nations may have European stock; they also have peoples descended from racial mixtures, negroes or Indians. Argentinians have no racial problems because such minorities are virtually non-existent but their prejudice against non-Europeans is quite evident in the way they look down on their neighbors to the north and west.

They would like to see themselves outsized like the great pampas, with the independence, confidence and bravadura of the gaucho. But the great adventurous days of the pampas are for the most part over today. And the attitudes and traditions which seemed so splendid when they were part of a paternalistic-hacienda system serve only to defeat their attempts at greatness today.

Intellectuals will tell you that apathy, the myself-my family-my group first attitude, the distrustfulness of others, the self-pity, the lack of responsibility, etc., are the cause of their country's failure to make use of their great potential. This is not all. They seem to find great pleasure in innumrating the many flaws in their countrymen

which hold back their great destiny. They find so little right with the Argentine character that it is soon apparent that they would like their compatriots to be something quite different than they are or ever could be.

The result of all this self-criticism is the creation of a feeling of impotence, of wanting to be different and yet wanting to be the same and not sure which way to turn. They want the security and the comfort of the old ways but also the achievements, the progress, the good life, the esteem which a transformed and developed Argentina would bring.

Argentinian music traditionally has been pretty gloomy stuff, and Argentinians are accused of being naturally morose. But whether the characteristic is innate or caused by contemplating their troubles, it is true that I have never seen so many people enjoying their misery so much. The Argentinian is in love with himself and his problems, will talk about them endlessly, criticizing, living off them like a prima donna off her scrapbook. He is sure of a great future and waits for it endlessly while moaning and commiserating on the slowness of fate. "If the country started moving ahead," an Argentinian sociologist pointed out, "we would have nothing to talk about - we'd have to keep prodding until we found something wrong."

### Chile

Chileans look at themselves as Latin America's most sensible people. Argentina's political development has been revolutionary and often influenced by extremism; by contrast, that of Chile has been moderate and evolutionary. There are some purely physical reasons for this difference. Chile is a very compact country with 90% of its population located in its central section, while people in both Argentina and Brazil are diffused over wide and inaccessible areas. It has not had to fight the battles of regionalism where area loyalties sometimes cause long-lasting antagonisms.

Also, compared to Argentina, its stream of immigrants from Europe has been moderate in flow and number, making it much easier to integrate newcomers into the society.

In Argentina and Brazil it is the military which acts as the conscience of the country, and sometimes not a very good one. In Chile, much to that country's pride, the military is downgraded and, as a Chilean sociologist said, "Here it is the people who serve as the nation's conscience; they believe in democracy and do not need the armed forces to protect their interests." The military, by tradition, is bound not to interfere in political affairs. It is not considered a very high profession and its influence in the life of the country is negligible - a very different state of affairs than exists in either Argentina or Brazil.

Chileans pride themselves in their reliance on law, on their constitution. After the election of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei last year, there was some fear that there might be some kind of overthrow of the parliament, the traditional body of government, either by opponents of

Frei who feared his popularity and the liberalism of his views, or by his supporters who wanted to dump a congress which continually put obstacles in the way of his program of reforms. In spite of the fact that in a national poll over 88% of the people polled were in favor of closing parliament, long-time political observers in the country assured me on my visit there, "A revolution or a coup just wouldn't be acceptable here....It just isn't done. It's against tradition. It would be ridiculous. The people wouldn't stand for it." And while a majority sympathetic to Frei was elected to parliament at the next election, the parliamentary tradition remains and there has been no violence or attempt to bring about change by force.

There is a tradition here of a rather good public service. Although there is a bureaucracy its evils are less noticable than in Brazil or Argentina. Political honesty as well as modesty is not as rare as it is in other Latin American countries; in Chile it is expected. Ex-President Jorge Alessandri typified the values of the upper and middle class; conservative in approach to problems, economy conscious in government and in his personal habits. He ate frugally, lived in his own apartment rather than in the house provided by the government, and often walked to work like his fellow countrymen without a bodyguard.

The manifestation of these values has been a rather flexible or liberal kind of conservatism. Chile has been governed by a combination of middle class and aristocratic elites which, at least since the 20's, has been flexible enough to allow concessions to key groups who might conceivably foster violent upheaval. Although there have been and still are great differences in wealth and opportunity within the country, an American observer has indicated that the Chileans' "love of Chile as a country and nation, a highly positive form of nationalism, tends to over-reach the breach." Even before the Christian Democrats swept into power in the March parliamentary elections, 50% of the electorate in the previous national elections had voted for parties which advocated programs changing the country's socio-economic-political structure. But even the Alessandri Government, considered to be right of center in the country's political spectrum, was progressive enough to be held up as an example to other Latin American countries. It had a major housing program, plans for change in land tenure and for tax reforms as well as a 10 year development scheme.

That Chile was ready to move beyond that is indicated by the last election when Frei was elected as a reformer. That Chile still adheres to its values of moderation is indicated by the fact that he won from a party further to the left and with more extreme proposals. More significant when comparing Chilean people with other Latin Americans is the fact that while many of them were captivated by Frei's personality they did not vote for him so much as an individual as for his party's platform. In both Argentina and Brazil politics is to a far greater extent based on personalism; parties are founded around a personality rather than a platform or an ideology.

All in all, educated Chileans take great pride in their country's civilized traditions. Their capitol, Santiago, is considered by those living there to be the Geneva of Latin America not only because of the numerous international agencies that have their home in the city but because of its cultured and civilized air. They take pride in their European stock (70% are European) and in their French taste in art, literature and food. Even their political party structure and that of the Catholic church show a definite French influence. (It is said that when a good Chilean dies, he goes to Paris). They look with some kindly feeling on Uruguay whom they believe share a refined European culture but feel vastly superior to both Argentina and Brazil. Argentinians may be European by race and association but, to the Chilean, they lack the good sense and savoir faire of really cosmopolitan people. And while they may not indicate as much concern about racial purity as do the Argentinians they do look down on their Indians for their uncultured (by European standards) ways. Thus they think of Bolivians, most of whom are Indian stock, as "hicks" and they make a distinction between Central Americans (who have Indian blood) and South Americans (who have less or no Indian inheritance). They can't help but feel the differences between their relative purity and the happy mixture that is Brazil.

Here lies the greatest fault of the Chilean people, and thus of their economic and political leadership. They have little or no concern for those Indians who are so much a part of their country. With their emphasis on being European they have attempted to play down the significant number and heritage of the Chilean Indian. About  $\frac{1}{2}$  million Indians live in Chile; 300,000 on reserves and 200,000 outside. This is about 5 times as many as live in all of Brazil and 20 times those that remain in Argentina. A Chilean student of her country's race relations told me that many of those who are now considered European were in fact mestizos, descendents of Spanish-Indian parentage of long ago. Although she felt there was little existent racial tension, she believed there was a great potential for trouble.

Chilean Indians are members of the Araucanos tribe, the only tribe in the Americas other than the Seminoles never to be defeated by the invading Europeans. I talked with Dr. Ximena Bunster who has lived and worked among the tribes. "Chileans believe association with Indians would lead to children of less intelligence. Indians are looked upon, as is true of minority peoples everywhere, as dirty, lazy, not too intelligent, etc. Indians have found it difficult to improve their condition. They have difficulty in getting loans, for instance, to improve their homes, the kind of education necessary to get other than manual labour, and on around the vicious circle. There is an Indian Service with rather good agents who try to help the Indians assimilate into the Chilean culture, but that is a rather difficult business because the Indians are very proud and consider themselves superior to the Chileans who were not able to defeat them as a nation. Their word for the Chilean white man is "huinca" (thief). They refuse to cooperate with such innocent emissaries as health officials who try to inoculate them against diseases. They complain that the health people with their needles treat them as if they were animals.

Whatever their problems, one attitude is clear of the country as a whole and that is optimism. Some Chileans claim that Argentines have never heard of the word ("It would be against their nature to think that way.") but in Chile one could feel it in the very air while I was there. They have something that the Argentines lack which works in their favor: a sense of humor. Chileans can be just as critical of their government and their leaders as the Argentines but, as one countryman pointed out, "Our people have an acute sense of what is ridiculous. If we are wise we try not to put ourselves in such situations. If we do we certainly expect that it will be noticed."

Perhaps Chile can bring off her social revolution by peaceful means. She has a long way to go but what seems impossible in Argentina and improbable in Brazil comes to seem quite possible for Chileans as they now move ahead.

### Brazil

Brazilians have an even keener sense of the ridiculous than the Chileans. Their humor permeates all phases of their life. They also pride themselves on their peacefulness and their concern for constitutionality. Their revolutions, they will point out, have usually been bloodless. And in the process there has always been a high regard for doing things constitutionally.

Somehow things take on a storybook quality in Brazil. There still seems to be something unreal to me about a constitutional revolution. But then Brazil is a country of contrasts and ambiguities where reason or logic cannot be relied on in trying to understand the people and why they are like they are.

In the first place Brazil is such a large country - as large as the continental United States - and there is as much difference between the people in the Northeast and the Southern industrial complex as there is between New York City and Americus, Georgia. Southern Brazil, with its large European population, has more in common with Buenos Aires and Santiago than it does with the Amazonas region. And yet the amazing thing is that there are some Brazilian traits that seem common to all the people and that set them apart from both Argentina and Chile. In Argentina and Chile the large proportion of the people are urbanites; the 1960 census showed the urban population in Argentina as 68%, Chile, 67%, and Uruguay, 81%. In Brazil, even with the steady migration to the cities, the 1960 census showed only 35% as urbanites, and many of them still retain their rural culture.

Perhaps this is why the family is still the most important unit in Brazilian life. Brazil has come less far than Argentina in breaking away from the traditional pattern of colonial paternalism. The Brazilian's family includes not only those immediately related but distant cousins, god-children and even close friends. Members of this group look after each other and provide a security that is much needed in the shifting sands of Brazilian life. Upper class families particularly

tend to insulate their positions of power from intrusions by outsiders, creating a block to the mobility of Brazilians from the lower classes except by marriage. A study of family connections would show their overwhelming influence in business, politics, the military and in all phases of leadership.

As in Argentina, in Brazil there is a conspicuous absence of community spirit. Instead of community action, the needs of most people are met by a complicated network of personal and family relationships. Charity outside the family group may and often does exist on a very personal basis, but concern and responsibility for those outside one's immediate group is no more than a matter of whim. In part this is a legacy of the colonial patriarchal system and of the Roman Catholic Church which tended to leave the individual alone as long as he met his formal religious obligations. It is a legacy which has led the Brazilian to react negatively to any idea of an impersonal business or political organization. The formal structure of the government, the system by which things are supposed to be done, may be argued about (although the argument may be on the artistic merits of the organizational chart rather than the efficiency of the plan), agreed upon and installed as law. But the Brazilian will continue to do business on a person to person basis. As proper procedures and formally established channels grow more complex, he simply learns to get what he wants or needs in spite of them. The idea of "jeito" is very basic to the Brazilian personality. It is difficult to define but a person with jeito is one who is able to maneuver the short cuts necessary (either through the passage of money or through knowing the right person to see, etc.) to get things accomplished.

If you need something done in Brazil the usual procedure is to go to a friend, a member of your family or a patron in the proper department. If no one you know is in the department you must start tracing relationships until you have found someone in this category who knows someone else until you have, by a circuitous route, established contact with the department. Your contact will then contact more influential friends until the matter is eventually arranged. If you are outside the system, as are most members of the lower class, without a patron or money, the chances of getting anything done through proper channels are almost nil. A foreigner, or an outsider with money, can hire a despachante, an agent who through his personal contacts, his knowledge of where a little money would help, has shown that he has enough jeito to overcome any problems standing in the way of the gaining of papers, the granting of contracts, etc.

There are instances in Brazil of regulations which have become so complex that they are almost impossible to follow and no one knows for sure any more just what they mean. It would appear to be a relatively easy matter to simplify procedures so that they could be followed more efficiently and serve more people adequately, but few Brazilians seem concerned. They work hard to unsnare themselves when they have a problem but when it is resolved they seem to forget that they might again have the same trouble. They will have sympathy for you and your particular

problem with the bureaucracy and may even help you to beat the red tape but would see no reason to change the system which creates such injustices.

A good example of the Brazilian attitude and of the Brazilian character came to our notice when a neighbor in our villa, a visiting professor from Columbia University, tried to get the papers necessary to leave Brazil after a six months exchange at the University of Guanabara. For almost a month he, with or without his despachante, went time and again to stand in some line or other, or to contend with some stipulation in an exceedingly complex procedure. Every afternoon he would return to the villa more furious with the system and retire to his typewriter to release his frustrations on an account of that day's absurdities. He threatened that when and if he ever got out of the country he would send this outpouring to the proper authorities and let them know just how bad things were.

In due time we received a carbon of a beautifully satirical six page account of his suffering and an elegantly phrased suggestion that if Brazilian authorities would like to have others come to help their country they might do a little something to make the procedure a bit easier for getting back out. Copies of the letter had been sent to the Brazilian Ambassador to the United States, the head of Immigration and Customs and key people at both the Brazilian and American embassies. With great curiosity I enquired from friends in our embassy in Rio just how the letter had been received by the Brazilians. "They loved it," I was told. "It's such a beautiful piece of writing, so well phrased, so witty. There is actually talk of having it published!" "Are they going to do anything about his suggestions?" I enquired. I got a look of complete disbelief that I could be so naive. "Of course not."

This Brazilian kind of apathy, if that is the proper word for it, is not the same as the fatalistic narcissism of Argentina. Nor is their optimism similar to that great moving force in Chile. Perhaps because of the fact that so many Brazilians are still rural-minded, even in the city, they seem exceedingly tolerant of their poor status and the lack of any great expectations. In the country their reliance on and respect for the local patron continues. T. Lynn Smith, in his book, Brazil, People and Institutions, points out that while there has been a growing restlessness among agricultural workers in the Northeast, "until very recently the average caboclo (farmer) probably never entertained for one moment the thought that someday he might operate a small farm of his own." In the cities today, particularly in Sao Paulo where workers have achieved a certain mobility, they have become increasing class conscious and less docile. But on the whole they seem strangely easy-going when faced with what a North American would consider intolerable prospects for advancement or security.

In the meantime the people, particularly the lower classes, let off steam at Carnival, the song and dance orgy for which they prepare in Samba schools throughout the year. And they participate in sports -

there is always a soccer ball to be kicked or a game to be watched, a kite to be flown. There are the soul-satisfying rites of the various Afro-Christian cults, bringing excitement both to those who participate and to those who only watch. There is a perpetual playing of the numbers. All day every day the lottery booths on the street corners are busy. Most Brazilians feel that the problems of their country are too large and too complex ever to be solved. The degree of this feeling varies in different parts of the country; there is more bustle about solving them in Rio than in the Northeast, more in Americanized Sao Paulo than in Rio.

I guess the particular quality that most sets Brazilians apart from their neighbors, their saving grace as well as their greatest deterrent to progress, is their flexibility. Things are never black and white in Brazil but rather a kaleidoscope of color to which they adjust like chameleons. Brazilians are proud of the fact that their country, the largest Catholic country in the world, offers freedom of religion to all, Catholic, Jew, Positivist or follower of one of the various Afro-Christian cults. They are proud of their multi-racial heritage, and while discrimination does still exist they probably offer more than any other country a place where men of all races can live in harmony.

They have adjusted to a long history of inflation by merely ceasing to save their money. Money saved is money lost as the exchange rate balloons. So they buy real estate, televisions, anything for which they can put a little down and pay a little each month, thus solving their individual problem and leaving it to someone else to worry about stopping the terrifying economic spiral. They adjust to their changes in government in somewhat the same way. The military acts as their conscience in battling corruption in government. In the March 31st coup of last year a great many of the poorer people and the intellectuals were upset by the overthrow of the Goulart Government even when they were ready to admit its flaws. But they go along with the change with relatively minor grumbling as long as they feel their constitution is being upheld. They have remained constitutional through the years as they have learned to adjust it slightly to fit different situations instead of overthrowing it with every dramatic change. So that while they may have at times a "rationed democracy" they never completely give up their democratic birthright. Just another example of the jeito that keeps Brazil going.

For in Brazil no situation becomes too intolerable to be laughed at, no one can be so caught up in his own seriousness to laugh at his own image. In Rio, whatever the problem they will laugh and say life is too short and difficult to get upset - much better just to go to the beach!

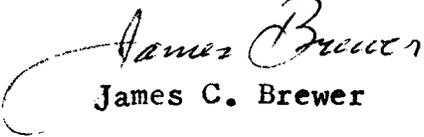
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From this brief and facile summary of my look at the ABC powers of Latin America it is easy to see that each country shares characteristics of the other in some degree. The similarities are particularly distinct

in those areas in which the Catholic Church and the patriarchal society played the most important part in the development and colonization: the role of the father figure, the personalism and maternalism, to some extent the apathy, the inefficiency, the disregard for the importance of time.

But in each country the interplay of the geography, the people, the climate and their relation to each other has added color and dimension of a different kind to the picture each presents to the world. While it is possible to generalize about Latin America and its problems, it is vitally important that we pattern our dealings with each country with sound understanding of its particular personality and needs.

Sincerely yours,

  
James C. Brewer

Received in New York August 24, 1965